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STATINTL

The Washington Merry-Go-Round

By Jack Anderson

POW Secrets

Government red tape and secrecy rules have kept hundreds of documents on prisoners of war in Saigon for up to two years while the POW families waited and wondered about their loved ones.

One classified data includes reports of Vietcong prisoner interrogations, CIA memos, Army intelligence papers and other fragments of military information gleaned from the field in Vietnam.

Interwoven with genuine secrets are such innocuous facts as the location of POWs, their condition, orders given for their protection and even an intriguing plan to buy freedom for some prisoners through double agents.

Although the White House has paid lip service to the POWs and their families, it did not unlock the files until the case of Sgt. John Sexton came to light. His family feared he was dead, although U. S. Intelligence authorities had held a letter from him for two years which said he was alive.

To head off more "Sexton cases," Defense Secretary Mel Laird ordered a housecleaning of old POW data. This brought bales of documents to Washington from U. S. Intelligence files in Saigon.

The suppressed documents included nothing so dramatic as the Sexton letter. Nevertheless, some of the details, if released sooner, would have spared the news-starved families months of anguish.

To the credit of the Army causalties section handling the data in Washington, once a new fact was discovered it was telephoned to the family, or in some cases an officer flew to the POW family's home to brief them.